



MIDDLE MILK RIVER DRAINAGE

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

This drainage is located in north central Montana in Hill, Blaine, and Phillips counties and encompasses approximately 8,700 square miles. The landscape is diverse with cottonwood galleries and irrigated crop and hay lands along the Milk River and major tributaries, dry-land agriculture and rangeland throughout the area, and two island mountain ranges (Bear Paws and Little Rockies). Landownership in this area consists of federal, state, and private lands, including the Fort Belknap Reservation and a portion of the Rocky Boy Reservation. In this drainage, the Milk River flows for 302 miles from Fresno Reservoir downstream to Hinsdale. There are several major tributaries to the Milk River located in this reach. Lodge, Battle, and Frenchman Creeks all originate in Alberta and Saskatchewan, Canada; whereas Beaver (Hill), Clear, Peoples, and Little Boxelder Creeks originate in the Bear Paw Mountains and Beaver Creek (Phillips) originates in the Little Rocky Mountains.

There are numerous reservoirs located throughout this area. Most of these reservoirs are generally too shallow to support perennial fisheries and are primarily used for stock and irrigation. The largest reservoirs by surface acreage are Nelson, Dry Fork, Beaver Creek, Anita, and Ester Reservoirs which receive high numbers of visitors for fishing and other recreational activities. Nelson Reservoir is managed as an irrigation storage facility by the BOR and can experience considerable drawdowns during prolonged drought cycles.

FISHERIES MANAGEMENT

This area is home to a number of fish species including, walleye, yellow perch, northern pike, black crappie, burbot, sauger, lake whitefish, goldeye, shorthead redhorse, smallmouth buffalo, bigmouth buffalo, black bullhead, bluegill, pumpkinseed, green sunfish, smallmouth bass, channel catfish, largemouth bass, Iowa darter, brassy minnow, stonecat, white sucker, longnose sucker, common carp, emerald shiner, spottail shiner, fathead minnow, brook stickleback, lake chub, northern redbelly dace, longnose dace, western silvery minnow, and western silvery/plains minnow. Species such as rainbow trout, brown trout, brook trout, and mountain sucker are found in the headwaters of Clear Creek and Beaver Creek. Brook trout are also found in some of the headwater streams located in the Little Rockies.

Nelson Reservoir is managed primarily for walleye but also contains a good northern pike and yellow perch population. This reservoir will continue to be managed as a multi-species fishery with an emphasis on walleye management that promotes healthy walleye growth and adult densities.

Very little information has been obtained identifying the species composition, densities, interactions, and habitat use of native and non-native fishes within the Middle Milk River. Therefore, development and implementation of a standardized sampling program targeting multiple habitats with maximum efficiency will aid in addressing some of these questions.

Smaller reservoirs located throughout the area are managed for diversity and monitored every one to five years, based on angler use. Trap and transport of warm-water species such as yellow

perch, bluegill, black crappie, and fathead minnows is used to establish new fisheries, promote kids fishing, establish a forage base, or to supplement existing populations. Hatchery reared rainbow trout and largemouth bass are stocked into those ponds that have traditionally received them and exhibit good overwinter water conditions. Ponds and reservoirs will be re-stocked following severe drought events or winterkills. Windmill aeration systems are maintained on those ponds with marginal depths and low winter dissolved oxygen levels.

Angling opportunities occur year-round with anglers typically targeting the rivers and streams during the spring, and shifting to ponds and reservoirs from late spring through winter. Shore, boat, and ice fishing opportunities exist throughout the area with anglers using a variety of methods to catch multiple species.

HABITAT

The Middle Milk is one of the most impacted sections of river in Montana. There are eight in-stream dams/diversions used to divert water for irrigation and municipal use that are barriers to fish passage. Fish passage issues also exist in the larger tributaries as with a dam located on Frenchman Creek (Frenchman Dam). There are plans to identify those areas that restrict fish passage and promote stream crossing designs that provide aquatic connectivity. Implementing best management practices for improving bank stabilization and riparian habitats while opposing land use activities that further degrade habitat and water quality is emphasized as a general management strategy.

Nelson Reservoir is an off-stream storage facility that draws water from the Milk River and has water levels that are relatively stable, except during extreme drought, compared to other reservoirs within the area. Ensuring stable or rising reservoir levels during critical spawning and rearing periods allows this fishery to maintain balanced predator-prey densities and good growth rates.

Riparian habitats associated with smaller reservoirs vary depending on current rotational grazing plans and fencing. Water quality also varies based on surrounding land practices, depth, and seasonal climate. Working with federal agencies (e.g., BLM) to implement riparian fencing and off-site watering projects for livestock improves riparian habitats and increases the aesthetic values surrounding these small reservoirs.

FISHING ACCESS

Public access to the Middle Milk River is limited due to the predominance of private land along the river. There are three FWP Fishing Access Sites (Fresno Tailwater, Alkali Creek, and Bjornberg Bridge) and a number of bridges that anglers can use to access the Milk River and streams located throughout the area. Access to Nelson Reservoir is good with much of the adjacent land owned and managed by the BOR. Camping areas and two concrete boat ramps are located near the dam and east shoreline of the reservoir. There are also FASs located at Bear Paw Lake, Cole Ponds, and Faber Reservoir, giving anglers a diverse fishing opportunity on some smaller bodies of water. Local pond opportunities on state, federal, and private lands is also available throughout the area, and information can be found in the Region 6 pond guide. Access and opportunity will continue to be a major emphasis throughout the area.

SPECIAL MANAGEMENT ISSUES

Fishing Tournaments

Currently, one ice fishing tournament are held on Nelson Reservoir annually. Tournament dates must be finalized with the BOR prior to completion of the permit application issued by MFWP. Tournaments will be reviewed on an individual basis. Evaluation of proposed tournaments will include potential biological and social impacts. Each tournament undergoes a 30-day public review and comment period. Tournament directors will be required to report post-tournament catch-rate information in a standardized format.

Milk River and Nelson Reservoir Water Management

The St. Mary canal and existing infrastructure is approaching 100 years of age and is in need of major repairs. The St. Mary's Working Group is working on a plan to update and repair the existing infrastructure to ensure supplemental water continues to provide irrigation water to agricultural producers throughout the Milk River watershed. The BOR recently completed a transbasin water analysis study that identified potential climate change related impacts to the watershed. Anticipated impacts include highly variable water supplies that have the potential to limit all water uses over the next 40 year time period.

FISHERIES MANAGEMENT DIRECTION FOR MIDDLE MILK RIVER DRAINAGE

Water	Miles/Acres	Species	Origin	Management Type	Management Direction
Milk River - Fresno Reservoir tailwaters to Hinsdale	302 miles	Walleye, Northern pike, Yellow perch, Black crappie, Lake whitefish, Sauger, Channel catfish, Burbot	Wild	General	Develop and implement a standardized sampling program to monitor sport fish populations. Better understand entrainment losses of all fishes through diversion canals and intake structures.
		Native non-game fishes	Wild	Conservation	Monitor populations to detect changes in species composition and abundance.
		Rainbow trout	Hatchery	Put-Grow-Take	Continue to stock 4,000 rainbow trout into the Fresno Tailwaters annually.
Habitat needs and activities: Work with local, state, and federal agencies along with landowners to implement best management practices that improve or maintain natural riverine habitats.					
Beaver Creek Section 03 and 04- Bear Paw Lake headwaters to East Fork Dam tailwaters	12 miles	Brook trout, Rainbow trout	Wild	General	Manage for self sustaining brook trout fishery. Develop and implement a standardized sampling program to understand fish assemblage and population size.
Habitat needs and activities: Work with Beaver Creek County Park to implement best management practices that improve or maintain natural riverine and riparian habitats.					
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Water	Miles/Acres	Species	Origin	Management Type	Management Direction
Beaver Creek Section 02- Beaver Creek Reservoir headwaters to Bear Paw Lake tailwaters.	8 miles	Brown trout	Hatchery	Put-Grow-Take	Stock 2,000 brown trout annually for put and take trout fishery.
		Rainbow trout, Brook trout, Walleye, Northern pike, Yellow perch, Smallmouth bass	Wild	General	Develop and implement a standardized sampling program to understand fish assemblage and population size.
Habitat needs and activities: Work with Beaver Creek County Parks to implement best management practices that improve or maintain natural riverine and riparian habitats.					
Bear Paw Lake	45 acres	Rainbow trout	Hatchery	Put-Grow-Take	Stock 20,000 rainbow trout annually for put and take trout fishery.
		Brook trout, Smallmouth bass	Wild/Hatchery	General/Special Regulations	Consider increasing daily combined trout limit from 3 to 5 fish. Manage for self-sustaining smallmouth bass population.
		Walleye	Hatchery	Put-Grow-Take	Stock walleye fingerlings as biological control of white sucker on an as-needed basis.
Beaver Creek Section 01- Confluence of Milk River to Beaver Creek Reservoir tailwaters.	22 miles	Brown trout	Hatchery	Put-Grow-Take	Stock 3,000 brown trout annually for put and take trout fishery.
		Rainbow trout, Brook trout, Walleye, Northern Pike, Yellow Perch, Smallmouth bass	Wild	General	Develop and implement a standardized sampling program to understand fish assemblage and population size.
Habitat needs and activities: Work with local, state, and federal agencies along with landowners to implement best management practices that improve or maintain natural riverine habitats.					

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Beaver Creek Reservoir	160 acres	Rainbow trout, Walleye	Hatchery	Put-Grow-Take	Stock 50,000 rainbow trout annually for put and take trout fishery. Consider increasing daily combined trout limit from 3 to 5 fish. Evaluate current walleye stocking programs success. Implement a walleye stocking strategy that optimizes stocked walleye recruitment and relative abundance while maintain a good forage base.
		Northern pike, Yellow perch, Smallmouth bass, Brook trout	Wild	General	Continue to monitor these populations as well as evaluate the biological and social impacts regarding a black crappie introduction into the reservoir.
Habitat needs and activities: MFWP has requested that reservoir water levels remain stable to slightly increasing during the spring spawning period (April-May).					
Clear Creek	40 miles	Walleye, Northern pike, Yellow perch, Sauger	Wild	General	Better understand fish assemblage and population size of game fishes.
		Native non-game fishes	Wild	Conservation	Protect habitat and provide passage where applicable.
		Brook trout	Wild	General	Manage for self-sustaining brook trout fishery.
Habitat needs and activities: Identify habitat issues and work closely with local conservation districts, county road crews, and landowners to implement safe water crossings which emphasis fish passage and water connectivity.					
Lodge Creek, Battle Creek	62 miles, 70 miles	Walleye, Northern pike, Black bullhead, Sauger, Yellow Perch	Wild	General	Better understand fish assemblage and population size of game fishes.
		Native non-game fishes	Wild	Conservation	Protect habitat and provide passage where applicable.
Habitat needs and activities: Identify habitat issues and work closely with local conservation districts, county road crews, and landowners to install safe water crossings which emphasize fish passage and water connectivity.					

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Peoples Creek	70 miles	Walleye, Northern pike, Black bullhead, Yellow perch	Wild	General	Better understand fish assemblage and population size of game fishes.
		Native non-game fishes	Wild	Conservation	Protect habitat and provide passage where applicable.
		Brook trout	Wild	General	Manage for self-sustaining brook trout fishery.
Habitat needs and activities: Identify habitat issues and work closely with local conservation districts, county road crews, and landowners to implement safe water crossings which emphasis fish passage and water connectivity.					
Dry Fork Reservoir	350 acres	Walleye	Hatchery	Put-Grow-Take	Stock 10,000 walleye fingerlings annually.
		Northern pike, Yellow perch, Black crappie	Wild	General	Maintain a quality fishing experience for all species. Continue to monitor the population.
Habitat needs and activities: Look to minimize irrigation impacts on pool elevations.					
Ross Reservoir	6 acres	Yellowstone cutthroat trout	Hatchery	Put-Grow-Take	Maintain current harvest opportunity
Faber Reservoir	38 acres	Rainbow trout	Hathcery	Put-Grow-Take	Manage for put and take rainbow trout fishery. Get feedback from anglers on possibly introducing black crappie.
Brookie Pond	4 acres	Brook trout	Hatchery	Put-Grow-Take	Maintain current harvest opportunity
Habitat needs and activities: Maintain windmill aerator.					
Frenchman Creek	78 miles	Walleye, Northern pike, Black bullhead, Yellow perch	Wild	General	Better understand fish assemblage and population size of game fishes.
		Native non-game fishes	Wild	Conservation	Protect habitat and provide passage where applicable.
Habitat needs and activities: Identify habitat issues and work closely with local conservation districts, county road crews, and landowners to implement safe water crossings which emphasis fish passage and water connectivity.					

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Beaver Creek (Phillips County)	78 miles	Walleye, Northern pike, Black bullhead, Yellow perch	Wild	General	Better understand fish assemblage and population size of game fishes.
		Native non-game fishes	Wild	Conservation	Protect habitat and provide passage where applicable.
		Brook trout	Wild	General	Manage for self-sustaining brook trout fishery.
Habitat needs and activities: Identify habitat issues and work closely with local conservation districts, county road crews, and landowners to implement safe water crossings which emphasis fish passage and water connectivity.					
Nelson Reservoir	4,331 Acres	Walleye, Northern pike, Yellow perch, Black crappie, Lake whitefish, Smallmouth bass, Channel catfish	Wild/Hatchery	General/Put-Grow-Take	Evaluate current cost/benefits of our walleye stocking program as it relates to walleye abundance, growth, and condition. Manage for sustainable walleye, northern pike, and yellow perch fishery year-round. Evaluate the rising smallmouth bass densities and its effects on the existing fish community.
Trout Ponds- Located throughout Hill, Blaine, and Phillips Counties	Various	Rainbow trout, Brook trout	Hatchery	Put-Grow-Take	Monitor water conditions and impacts from winterkill. Stock trout based on current 6-year stocking plan.
Habitat needs and activities: Work with Bureau of Land Management and landowners to increase riparian habitats and aesthetic landscapes surrounding the ponds. Maintain windmill aeration systems on ponds with marginal depths.					
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Warm water Reservoirs and Ponds- Located throughout Hill, Blaine, and Phillips Counties	Various	Largemouth bass, Northern pike, Walleye, Smallmouth bass, Channel catfish, Black crappie, Yellow perch, Bluegill	Wild/Hatchery/ Transfer	General/ Put-Grow-Take	Manage as self-sustaining fisheries. Supplement populations with hatchery stocking and wild fish transfers as needed. Monitor water conditions and impacts from winterkill.
Habitat needs and activities: Work with Bureau of Land Management and landowners to increase riparian habitats and aesthetic landscapes surrounding the ponds. Maintain windmill aeration systems on ponds with marginal depths.					

